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ABSTRACT

This paper places continuing professional education (CPE) within the context of the whole of education for librarianship. Using the fable of the blind men and the elephant as an analogy, the discussion explores the who, what, when, where, why, and how of CPE and its relationship to the range of educational possibilities, including: (1) the importance of CPE for every information worker; (2) definitions of the components of CPE, i.e., "continuing," "professional," "education," and "continuing education"; (3) dividing education into its phases, i.e., preschool, K-12, university/college, preservice, CPE, and continuing personal education; (4) the venue for CPE, including formal courses, workshops and seminars, conferences, tutorials, independent study and reading, and teaching, presentations, and publishing; (5) issues of responsibility and quality in regard to participants, funders, providers, and quality assurance; and (6) the issue of competence. (MES)

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Describing the elephant: what is Continuing Professional Education?

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Abstract

Continuing professional education [CPE] has been defined in many different ways, which has often resulted in confusion. This paper attempts to place continuing professional education within the context of the whole of education for librarianship. Using the fable of the blind men and the elephant as an analogy, the discussion explores the who, what, when, where, why and how of CPE and its relationship to the range of educational possibilities.

Paper

In the farthest reaches of the desert, there was a city in which all the people were blind. A king and his army were passing through that region, and camped outside the city. The king had with him a great elephant, which he used for heavy work and to frighten his enemies in battle. The people of the city had heard of elephants, but never had the opportunity to know one. Out rushed six young men, determined to discover what the elephant was like.

The first young man, in his haste, ran straight into the side of the elephant. He spread out his arms and felt the animal's broad, smooth side. He sniffed the air, and thought, "This is an animal, my nose leaves no doubt of that, but this animal is like a wall." He rushed back to the city to tell of his discovery.

The second young blind man, feeling through the air, grasped the elephant's trunk. The

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elephant was surprised by this, and snorted loudly. The young man, startled in turn, exclaimed, "This elephant is like a snake, but it is so huge that its hot breath makes a snorting sound." He turned to run back to the city and tell his tale.

The third young blind man walked into the elephant's tusk. He felt the hard, smooth ivory surface of the tusk, listened as it scraped through the sand, then as the elephant lifted the tusk out, he could feel its pointed tip. "How wonderful!" he thought. "The elephant is hard and sharp like a spear, and yet it makes noises and smells like an animal!" Off he ran.

The fourth young blind man reached low with his hands, and found one of the elephant's legs. He reached around and hugged it, feeling its rough skin. Just then, the elephant stomped that foot, and the man let go. "No wonder this elephant frightens the king's enemies," he thought. "It is like a tree trunk or a mighty column, yet it bends, is very strong, and strikes the ground with great force." Feeling a little frightened himself, he fled back to the city.

The fifth young blind man found the elephant's tail. "I don't see what all the excitement is about," he said. "The elephant is nothing but a frayed bit of rope." He dropped the tail and ran after the others.

The sixth young blind man was in a hurry, not wanting to be left behind. He heard and felt the air as it was pushed by the elephant's flapping ear, then grasped the ear itself and felt its thin roughness. He laughed with delight. "This wonderful elephant is like a living fan." And, like the others, he was satisfied with his quick first impression and headed back to the city.

But finally, an old blind man came. He had left the city, walking in his usual slow way, content to take his time and study the elephant thoroughly. He walked all around the elephant, touching every part of it, smelling it, listening to all of its sounds. He found the elephant's mouth and fed the animal a treat, then petted it on its great trunk. Finally he returned to the city, only to find it in an uproar. Each of the six young men had acquired followers who eagerly heard his story. But then, as the people found that there were six different contradictory descriptions, they all began to argue. The old man quietly listened to the fighting. "It's like a wall!" "No, it's like a snake!" "No, it's like a spear!" "No, it's like a tree!" "No, it's like a rope!" "No, it's like a fan!"

The old man turned and went home, laughing as he remembered his own foolishness as a young man. Like these, he once hastily concluded that he understood the whole of something when he had experienced only a part. He laughed again as he remembered his greater foolishness of once being unwilling to discover truth for himself, depending wholly on others' teachings. But he laughed hardest of all as he realized that he had become the only one in the city who did not know what an elephant is like.[1]

Continuing professional education has been a topic of great interest within IFLA and throughout the profession for many years, yet confusion exists as to just what it means. The Continuing Professional Education Round Table [CPERT] has charged me to address this issue and this tale or fable presents a useful introduction. Just as the elephant was subject to several interpretations by the six young blind men, it took the wisdom of the sage to recognize that the whole of something tends to be complex, and that making assumptions from partial evidence can be very misleading.

In terms of continuing professional education, partial descriptions have ranged from courses in universities and colleges to workshops within the library setting. This paper will attempt to place CPE within the whole of education for librarianship. The structure of the paper will be linked to the components of the lead paragraph in a newspaper article: Who, what, when, where, how, and why. At the conclusion of the discussion, I hope to have provided a useful map to the sometime confusing terrain and highlighted where CPE contributes to the whole.

Who: Every Information Worker

Continuing professional education is in the best interests of every person working in the information industry which, of course, includes libraries. Although the issue of competence will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, it is important to also introduce it here since it is key to maintaining a successful professional career. Regardless of job title and responsibilities--professional, paraprofessional or clerical-- every staff member has the responsibility to stay up-to-date as the profession, technology and society change. Such currency embraces knowledge, skills, and attitudes--in other words, the entire spectrum of educational achievement. This is an all-encompassing responsibility that extends throughout the length of the worklife.

What: Definitions

The phrase "continuing professional education" can be sub-divided into its components, in order to better understand its origins:

> *Continuing*...To go on with a particular action or in a particular condition; persist; to exist over a prolonged period; last.
>
> *Professional*...Of, relating to, engaged in, or suitable for a profession; engaged in a specific activity as a source of livelihood; performed by persons receiving pay; having great skill or experience in a particular field or activity
>
> *Education*...the knowledge or skill obtained or developed by a learning process
>
> *Continuing education*...An educational program that brings participants up to date in a particular area of knowledge or skills

These definitions are quite straightforward and understandable, so it is unlikely that the existing confusion can be traced to this source. Continuing professional education is clearly the process of engaging in education pursuits with the goal of becoming up-to-date in the knowledge and skills of one's profession. In a paper delivered at the IFLA/CPERT Third International Conference on Continuing Professional Education for the Information Professions, the authors described CPE as "educational activities primarily designed to keep practising librarians and information professionals abreast of their particular domain in the library or information centre, and to provide them with training in new fields." This approach expands the definition and moves beyond maintaining current competence to the acquisition of new abilities as the profession changes. If the educational engagement is voluntary, then the individual's attitude toward work is proactive and forward-looking.

But perhaps the confusion is rooted in how education is perceived and where CPE is placed within the larger educational construct.

When: Dividing Education Into Its Phases

Education can be viewed as having several distinct, and overlapping segments.

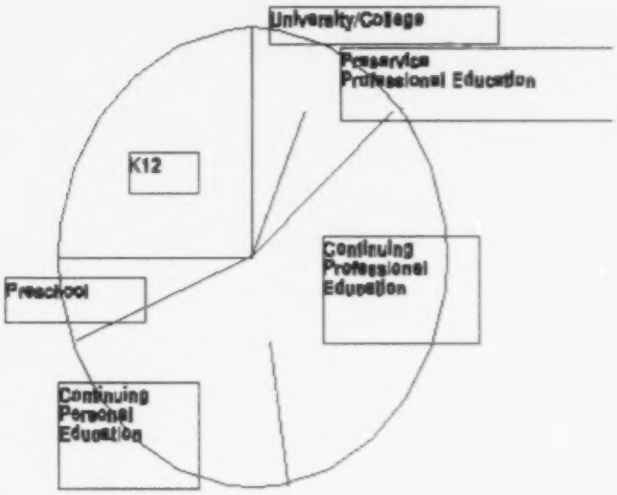

Fig. 1
A Lifelong Learning Model

The lines within the circle designate separation between segments, yet must be considered as flexible rather than arbitrary. Depending upon country and cultural norms plus personal interests, an individual will participate in various aspects of the lifelong learning model. The segments can be identified as:

Pre-school...any formal educational experiences occurring before the standard age of entering school.

K-12...education occurring between Kindergarten and graduation from high school.

University/College...post-secondary education that may, or may not, include professional pre-service education--depending upon the home country's professional requirements

Pre-service...education that may be a portion of baccalaureate study, post-diploma, or master's degree work.

Continuing professional education... education that takes place once professional qualification is achieved, with the intent of maintaining competence and/or learning new skills

Continuing personal education...education engaged in related to personal interests outside the workplace.

This model is intended to cover the entire life span. Therefore, continuing education, whether professional or personal, occupies the largest portion of the model.

Where: The Venue

Now that we have a context for the way continuing professional education 'fits' within the larger educational picture, it is time to move on to look at a range of possible venues. Continuing professional education can be offered in a variety of formats and locations, from formal face-to-face interactions to the use of electronic technologies. Some of these

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opportunities and venues include:

Formal Courses. Seeking a degree may be viewed by some as continuing education and, in very general terms, this is true. However, a degree program is more usefully defined as pre-service education. Even advanced degrees within library and information studies, while continuing a candidate's study in the field, should be regarded as different from continuing professional education. Formal courses may be offered by colleges and universities, technical schools, and private vendors/industries. They may extend across a semester or involve some combination of evenings and week-ends. Some formal courses may be considered as CPE if the student's intent is the updating of professional abilities outside of enrolling in a degree program.

Workshops and Seminars. Educational events that are short-term in nature, from one to five days, fall into this category. A workshop typically involves some experiential learning, whether that be hands-on skills development, role playing or scenario-based discussion sessions. Seminars more commonly draw directly upon student involvement, with less instructor lecture time.

Both formal courses and workshops/seminars may be offered in two primary venues:

- Classroom...when instructor and students gather together in a single physical location. In this venue, there may be a mix of degree-seeking and continuing education students. As stated above, it is the intent of the student that defines the educational context.

- Distance Education...when instructor and students are separated by time and/or distance. Distance education is a broad term that covers a variety of possible venues, including correspondence, video or audio teleconferencing, Web-based instruction, and so forth. The list of options continually changes as technologies emerge and phase-out.

Conferences. The gathering together of professionals in a conference venue such as IFLA provides many opportunities for continuing professional education. Participants can select from workshops, general sessions, paper sessions, and settings for social interaction and personal networking. Conferences offer a broad spectrum of formal and informal educational events and the social context is quite attractive to many professionals.

Tutorials. For the purposes of this paper, tutorials are defined as a one-to-one experience between instructor and student. Sometimes confused with "independent study," the tutorial includes both the face-to-face or electronic interaction--plus whatever research, reading and/or study is done by the student in preparation for that interaction.

Independent study and Reading. The "independent study" presented here involves work that is done entirely by the student, without any input from an instructor. Such study may be of short- or long-term duration and needs to be carefully documented if presented to an employing organization as evidence of continuing professional education.

Teaching, Presentations and Publishing. Less often recognized as CPE, preparing for teaching, delivering a paper, or writing an article or book involves considerable research and study. While this type of CPE also requires documentation for employment purposes, it is certainly true that considerable learning and effort is involved with this effort.

Certainly, continuing professional education can occur in a variety of different contexts and venues. But how does it take place? Who has the responsibility for providing, authorizing or encouraging CPE? How can the quality be assured?

How: Issues of Responsibility and Quality

The responsibility issue is complex, involving participants, funders, and providers. This

three-way involvement is a partnership, with all that such an arrangement implies: a sense of equity and benefit resulting from the arrangement. Participants need to feel that learning has taken place; funding suppliers, whether personal or organizational, must recognize value for monies expended; and providers require that evaluations were positive and anticipated costs were met.

Participants. Individuals are frequently represented as both participants and funders. Paying for one's own educational experience is a common by-product of a personal commitment to professional competence. Participants also expend time, and this time allocation becomes increasingly valuable as the years go by; time is often perceived as more valuable than money in the second half of life. Library workers may engage in educational opportunities at the workplace, which is termed in-service or staff development, or personally in any of the occasions or venues described earlier.

Funders. While individuals may finance their own education, funding may also secured from various organizations. The library itself may support in-service training and/or offer stipends to employees that engage in education off-site. Library systems are another source of funding, as are governmental agencies and private endowments. In each country, the pattern of funding resources will vary and library workers need to become knowledgeable about where these monies might be located.

Providers. Schools, organizations and vendors are representative of the many continuing professional education providers in the marketplace. For all of these agencies, recovering expended costs can be a critical concern. Beyond the financial considerations, however, lies the nebulous issue of quality. All of the partners in the CPE enterprise have an expectation that the educational event will be of high quality.

Quality. How can quality be assured? In 1988, a unit of the American Library Association considered this question in detail and prepared a set of "Guidelines." These "Guidelines" provided criteria for group programs and activities, individualized programs and activities, instructional materials and technologies continuing education providers, and learning consultants. While the question of quality could easily be a paper unto itself, there are certain approaches to CPE that should be highlighted:

- *Needs Assessment* is the first step on the road to quality. Who is the audience for the program? What are the needs of this audience? What are the most appropriate learning strategies to meet those needs?

- *Planning / Developing Program Objectives* is the stage where what is learned from the Needs Assessment is translated into program design. Consideration of how adults learn is also factored into the decisions that are made.

- *Evaluation* of the educational event is both the final piece of one event and the first piece of those to come, as data is fed into the next needs assessment exercise. There are six steps to evaluating a learning activity: know your purpose(s) in evaluation, delineate what you need to discover, identify who knows what you need to discover, communicate what you need to discover to those who are best able to inform you, gather the information, and relate the findings to your purpose(s). Evaluation is an essential ingredient in strengthening the quality of CPE.

These issues of responsibility and quality are intrinsic to the "How" of making CPE happen.

Why: The Issue of Competence

Last, but certainly not the least of these components, is "Why": Why engage in continuing professional education? Why spend the money? Why put in the time and effort?

Central to the argument is competence: the competence of each individual library worker; the competence of the library /information agency so that it effectively serves its community; the competence that is both a right and an expectation by each customer. Competence rests on shifting sands these days, as the library strives to compete in a rapidly changing world. A century ago, libraries and publishers could have been regarded as the entire information industry; today, they are working to maintain market share in an industry that embraces more providers each day. Competition is very real, and libraries must provide service that is better, faster, and/or cheaper than other potential providers.

Consequently, the shelf life of a degree is approximately three years and declining. Maintaining competence and learning new skills must be at the top of every professional's "To Do" list. It is an ethical responsibility, to be sure, but also one that is pragmatic and critical for career success. Indeed, the "Why" of this paper has been the easiest to compose. Continuing professional education is no longer an option; it is a requirement of professional practice.

Summary

And so, we have described the elephant. It is not simply a wall, a snake, a spear, a tree trunk or a frayed piece of rope. Rather, it is a very large animal, with many attributes and, increasingly, a life of its own within the profession. In fact, we need to learn to ride this elephant so that it can take us into a brighter professional future. It is too large and important to ignore--and we do so at our peril. Each person must discover this truth for him or herself. It is a discovery that is both a mandate and an adventure--as we seek to become wise.

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